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SUBJECT: FEAR, LOATHING, AND STATE PATERNALISM IN MERIDA

CARACAS 00002058 001.2 OF 003

Classified By: POLITICAL COUNSELOR ROBERT DOWNES,
REASONS 1.4 (B) AND (D)

11. (C) Summary. University administrators, opposition parties, and civil society leaders in the university city of Merida increasingly fear the growing authoritarianism of President Chavez. University of Los Andes (ULA) administrators believe the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela (BRV) will put pressure on the autonomous university to be more "Bolivarian." Opposition parties in the city note that they lack resources to rebuild their bases and receive scant attention from self-censoring local media outlets. While Merida's opposition leaders favor mobilizing voters to vote against Chavez' proposed changes to the constitution in the December referendum, they fear that many of their party members will choose to abstain instead. Merida's pro-Chavez governor and city mayor are channeling significant state resources to poor neighborhoods via state-run social programs. Consequently, the BRV appears better poised to mobilize its supporters in Merida for the December constitutional referendum.
End Summary.

Merida: University City Under Bolivarian Pressure

12. (SBU) Merida is the capital of the western Andean state of the same name. The valley city of over 350,000 hosts the prestigious public University of Los Andes (ULA) and attracts both domestic and international tourists. ULA hosted a USA Cultural Week at the university administration's request October 1-5. DCM opened the event, and PAS provided a series of speakers, including Fulbright Alumni and Embassy speakers, as well as a visiting American classical guitarist. While the still autonomous ULA provides what many call an "umbrella of protection" against President Chavez, the university administration and opposition parties increasingly fear the government's growing authoritarianism.

13. (SBU) President Chavez narrowly carried the state of Merida in the December 2006 presidential elections, but consensus opposition candidate Manuel Rosales carried the city of Merida in that race. Traditional Venezuelan parties Democratic Action (AD) and the Christian Democrats (COPEI) remain relatively strong in Merida. Chavez supporters have attacked both parties' offices several times over the last several years. Pointing to residual char marks on the

ceiling not yet painted over, local COPEI Secretary General Americo Sulbaran told poloff that Chavistas last torched COPEI's offices with Molotov cocktails in December 2006 after Chavez won re-election. Two Merida AD leaders are still facing long trials on criminal charges related to Chavez' brief ouster in April 2002.

14. (C) ULA's 42,000 students have a well-deserved reputation for activism. Opposition and pro-government student leaders clashed in 2005 after the government annulled student elections that opposition student leader Nixon Moreno reportedly had won. Moreno went underground after the BRV pressed criminal charges against him, and in 2007 was given refuge in the Holy See Embassy in Caracas, where he still resides. The BRV reportedly mobilizes ultra-left students (and former students), who reside in strategically-located block of student housing, to counter opposition activities. A small group of current student leaders told Poloff that they are considering resuming street protests, but harbor doubts about their utility. They said opposition political parties want them to assume a disproportionate share of the risks in confronting the BRV without giving them due credit.

15. (C) The University of the Andes is one of a handful of legally protected autonomous universities in Venezuela. It guards its autonomy jealously despite receiving over 90 percent of its budget from the central government. University administrators, however, are increasingly convinced that Chavez has ULA in his sights and will take action - financially or more directly - to eliminate the university as a locus of opposition sentiment. During the DCM's October 1 visit, the ULA Vice Rector pointed to the BRV's elimination last year of the national university entry exam as one strong indication that serious change is in the air and that ULA will be "Bolivarianized." In an attempt to stymie or slow sentiment for a takeover or radicalization, ULA is working hard to open branches in lower-income

CARACAS 00002058 002.2 OF 003

neighborhoods in Merida.

Opposition Parties Flailing

16. (C) Opposition parties failed to unite behind a single candidate in the last state and local elections, facilitating the Fifth Republic Movement (MVR) victories of Governor Florencio Antonio Porras, a former military officer from Miranda State, and Merida Mayor Carlos Leon Mora. COPEI, AD, and Primero Justicia leaders told poloff that political contributions from local businesses have dried up in recent months. Moreover, a group of Merida business leaders told the DCM that they are increasingly fearful of BRV reprisals. Local opposition party leaders also said that the area's three regional TV networks and four newspapers are exercising more self-censorship since President Chavez' re-election.

17. (C) Further complicating the challenges opposition parties face, opposition party leaders all lamented that there is widespread apathy among voters despite the sweeping constitutional changes Chavez plans to put to a public referendum in early December. PJ and COPEI leaders stressed that they are encouraging their party members to vote against the reform package, but said a significant portion of their rank-and-file members favor abstaining. Local AD leaders said they favored participating in the referendum, but given AD's party decision to abstain in the 2005 parliamentary and 2006 presidential elections, they feared widespread abstentionism among its party members. While the leaders of opposition parties continue to meet in Merida, they said the lack of consensus among national opposition leaders on how to defeat Chavez' constitutional proposals is hurting them locally.

Bolivarian Paternalism

¶18. (C) Vice-Mayor David Segura, flanked by a wall-size city map with pins indicating existing BRV social programs, outlined for poloff the Bolivarian municipality's initiatives. He stressed that the majority of Venezuelans "lack of conscience" and require "a strong leader" like President Chavez to impose order. He extolled the work of the Barrio Adentro medical missions and community councils in the city. Community councils in Merida managed budgets of \$15,000-25,000 over the last year to implement microprojects, such as the installation of retaining walls and traffic lights. Segura claimed that Chavez' constitutional reform would give the councils more resources and ensure more equitable distribution of government resources and services across the city.

¶19. (C) During a walking tour of city hall, the Vice-Mayor proudly pointed out the municipal government's constituent call center staffed by 13 disabled persons, the city hall's recycling bins, a nursery, and a city van that dispenses subsidized medicines. He noted that the city hall coffee stand is operated by a cooperative, adding that it was the fourth such venture because "not all cooperatives are successful." Again, lamenting a lack of "discipline," Segura said all city hall employees have their index fingers digitally scanned when they report to and leave work to keep an accurate record of their time and attendance. Poloff separately visited well-trafficked, medium-sized Mercal store. The arrival of a shipment of coarse sugar had attracted over a dozen mid-day customers, but no refined white sugar, milk, eggs, or chicken were available.

Comment

¶10. (C) Merida illustrates the way the BRV is progressively penetrating and intimidating formerly strong anti-Chavez bastions. To their credit, many of Merida's university administrators as well as opposition and civil society leaders continue to promote and protect their remaining democratic freedoms despite the prospect of potential reprisals. Their efforts, however, do not constitute anything approaching a united front against Chavez' growing authoritarianism. In a city in which a majority of voters voted against President Chavez in December 2006, even Chavez' strongest opponents concede that a majority of city voters, due to opposition abstentionism, could potentially approve

CARACAS 00002058 003.2 OF 003

Chavez' sweeping constitutional changes. In addition, the state and capital city government have at their disposal significantly more resources to retain the loyalties, or at least placate, many of Merida's voters.

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